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ABSTRACT

Ecofeminism is a theory and a movement that makes explicit the links between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature in patriarchal cultures. This means coming to terms with a number of cherished and widespread beliefs, most notably the anthropocentric assumption that humans are different from, and superior to, the rest of nature, and therefore ought to dominate it. The privileging of rationalism within environmental discourse is evidence of a patriarchal bias that relies on the historical dualization of reason and emotion (paralleling the dualization of masculine and feminine and of culture and nature). In advocating a pedagogy from an ecofeminist perspective rooted in a politicized ethic of care, this essay has a dual purpose: helping students identify and participate in issues that are locally important and personally meaningful while ensuring that they make connections between these issues and the "big picture." The point is illustrated by a discussion of the differences between teaching about, in, for, and with the environment. The initial step of helping students build healthy relationships with their local communities, human and nonhuman, should be followed by relating their lived experiences to larger, even global, issues. If environmental education is to be truly transformative, students must have both the desire and the ability to become actively involved. An ecofeminist pedagogy that has the goal of developing in students a politicized ethic of care is a sound beginning. Contains 25 references. (TD)

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A Politicized Ethic of Care: Environmental Education from an Ecofeminist Perspective

Constance L. Russell and Anne C. Bell

As doctoral students, environmental educators, and nature advocates, we are often torn between the highly abstract, cerebral requirements of academia and the immediate, emotionally charged demands of teaching and activism. Although not entirely or necessarily distinct, these realms of activity do not meet to challenge and enrich each other as often as they should. In our desire to bring them together, we find inspiration in Carol Gilligan's (1982) notion of an "ethic of care." It is an idea central to much North American ecofeminist theory, and in its focus on contexts, relationships, and felt sense of need and responsibility, it bears great promise, we believe, for rethinking approaches to environmental education. In this chapter, we briefly introduce ecofeminism and describe how an ecofeminist ethic informs our teaching and learning.

Ecofeminism: An Introduction

Ecofeminism is a theory and a movement which makes explicit the links between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature in patriarchal culture; an ethical position informed by ecofeminist thought and activism is one which resists these oppressions. Exactly what ecofeminism means, however, is debated. Many different interpretations of ecofeminism exist and, as Linda Vance (1993) asserts, each is "rooted in a particular intersection of race, class, geography, and conceptual orientation" (pp. 125-126). This diversity also reflects the multiple points from which ecofeminists have entered the movement. These include both academic and activist involvement in animal liberation, environmentalism, international development, peace activism, biotechnology, and genetic engineering, to name but a few.

Our particular "take" on ecofeminism resembles most closely that which Carolyn Merchant (1990) has called socialist ecofeminism. According to her typology,

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socialist ecofeminists advocate a reassessment of cultural and historical attitudes toward nature and consider an analysis of the systemic oppression of women and nature essential to social transformation. Through our involvement in conservation and animal welfare issues, we have become keenly aware of the need for such an analysis. In practice, this has meant coming to terms with a number of cherished and widespread beliefs. Central is the anthropocentric (human-centred) assumption that humans are not only different from but superior to the rest of nature, and, therefore, can and ought to dominate.

A strong influence in ecofeminism has been deep ecology, a primarily academic movement which posits anthropocentrism as the root cause of the environmental crisis. The pervasive belief that nature is solely a resource for human use, according to deep ecologists, has led to exploitive and destructive relationships with the nonhuman. Unlike deep ecologists, however, many ecofeminists give equal if not greater importance in their analyses to androcentrism (male-centredness) and suggest that it is primarily men, not women, who have contributed to environmental degradation. Ecofeminists are critical of deep ecology's masculinist bias and of its failure to address issues of gender. Janis Birkeland (1993) writes, for example, that it is "abstract, aloof, impersonal, and gender-blind, and it ignores power" (p. 29). She dismisses deep ecology's focus on anthropocentrism on the grounds that "our gendered behavioural programming runs far deeper, and it is much harder to change than are cerebral concepts such as anthropocentrism" (p. 43).

Concerns about Anthropocentrism

While we recognize the need to address these criticisms, in our own work we share deep ecology's preoccupation with anthropocentrism. In our experience, anthropocentrism is anything but a merely cerebral concept. Indeed, it is a bias so deeply ingrained and so consistently acted upon in Western societies that, for the most part, it passes entirely unnoticed, or, when acknowledged, is simply regarded as "natural." In schools, for example, anthropocentrism is manifest in the fact that the nonhuman rarely figures except as a backdrop to human affairs (or worse, as an object for dissection or other experiments). The implications of what is taught and learned about living, breathing, sensing nonhuman beings are never examined.

Even in forums where critical pedagogy[1] is the order of the day, challenges to human-centred teaching practices are seldom articulated; and when they are, they are often vehemently resisted. For example, while fellow graduate students have been more than willing to probe the classist, racist, and sexist underpinnings of their methods and beliefs about education, most are, at best, only politely tolerant of our concerns about anthropocentrism. At times, when we have attempted to express them, we have been accused of self-righteously hijacking the class agenda. We feel caught in a bind in this regard: when the agenda itself is so strikingly anthropocentric, how does one raise these issues without deviating from the matters at hand?

In allying ourselves with ecofeminism, we are reluctant to enter chicken-or-egg deliberations about which comes first, androcentrism or anthropocentrism, or for that matter, racism, classism, or heterosexism. Instead, we agree with those ecofeminists who suggest that such either/or thinking be avoided. This means that while the two of us may focus our efforts in one direction, we need to be cognizant of different but equally pressing concerns. Inevitably, forms of oppression intersect, overlap, and feed on each other. They share a common logic. Consequently, it is important, as Val Plumwood (1991) maintains, that ecofeminists aim not to "absorb or sacrifice" each other's critiques, but to "deepen and enrich" them (p. 22). Indeed, ecofeminists are better able to resist the colonizing and homogenizing projects of capitalism and patriarchy as part of a solidarity movement that honours a diversity of perspectives (Shiva, 1993a). It is precisely in our differences that we find comfort and strength.

Certainly feminism's "critical bite" has much to offer deep ecology. As Karen J. Warren (1990) points out:

> [The label *feminist*] serves as an important reminder that in contemporary sex-gendered, raced, classed, and naturist [i.e., anthropocentic] culture, an unlabelled position functions as a privileged and "unmarked" position. That is, without the addition of the word *feminist*, one presents environmental ethics as if it has no bias, including male-gender bias, which is just what ecofeminists deny: failure to notice the connections between the twin oppressions of women and nature *is* male-gender bias. (p. 144)

Understanding Ways of Knowing

Coming to grips with such underlying biases has been and continues to be a challenge for us. We have come to realize, for example, that it is no mere coincidence that men tend to hold the positions of power in environmental and animal welfare circles (Hessing, 1993; Simmons, 1992; Vance, 1993). We have also learned to identify as fundamentally patriarchal the prevailing arguments that can be brought to bear in the defense of nature. Within the conservation movement, for instance, advocacy increasingly takes the form of environmental assessments, cost-benefit analyses, minimum viable population estimates, G.I.S. mapping, and so on. The knowledge that counts, in other words, is based in science and economics. It is assumed to be quantifiable and objective, and, therefore, best able to influence rational decision-makers. In contrast, knowledge which is admittedly partial, impassioned, and subjective is deemed suitable primarily for swaying the uninformed public and for soliciting funds. In Plumwood's (1991) opinion, the privileging of rationalism within environmental discourse is evidence of a patriarchal bias that relies on the historical dualization of reason and emotion which parallels the dualization of masculine and feminine as well as culture and nature (p. 5).

In thus linking patriarchy to the privileging of science and economics, our intent is neither to blame the men or women who use such arguments, nor to suggest that abstraction, quantification, and reason are somehow foreign to "women's ways of knowing." First, most conservationists of our acquaintance, motivated by love and deep concern for the natural world, use whatever means are available to them to sway the powers that be. In their desperate bids to dismantle the Master's house, they wittingly or unwittingly resort to the Master's tools (Lorde, 1984); whether they thus choose wisely is an open question.

Second, in qualifying ways of knowing as "masculine" or "feminine," we do not wish to imply that they are universal or biologically determined. Carol Gilligan's research demonstrated that, in current North American society, males tend to make moral decisions based on abstract reasoning about an ethic of justice, whereas females' decisions tend to be more contextual and based on an ethic of care. Nevertheless, as Birkeland (1993, pp. 22-23) points out, men and women have the capacity to choose between values and behaviour patterns. Just as some women exhibit more "masculine" traits, likewise many men are openly caring, gentle, and nondominating. We believe that nurture, not nature, is the deciding factor.

Our quarrel is not with men or even with reason per se, but rather with the unwarranted pretence that logic and abstractions are a means to universal and objective knowledge, and that they therefore deserve to be privileged at the expense of other ways of knowing. We are not advocating the abolition of reason; rational arguments have their place. Reliance on this approach alone, however, is insufficient.

A Politicized Ethic of Care

Our purpose here, then, is to advocate instead a pedagogy which is rooted in a politicized ethic of care. Deane Curtin (1991) first coined the phrase and suggested that the addition of a "radical political agenda" to Gilligan's ethic of care was essential to the development of an ecofeminist ethic (p. 66). Otherwise, caring could become localized in scope and we might, for example, "care for the homeless only if our daughter or son happens to be homeless" (p. 66), without examining the structures that contribute to the problem and our own role in perpetuating these structures. For Curtin, then, it is important to distinguish between caring *about* versus caring *for*. In other words, it is often much easier to proclaim how one cares *about* an issue like the homeless; to move toward what Curtin characterizes as caring *for* requires that one not only become actively involved in a local manifestation of a particular problem, but that one also explore the complex sociopolitical contexts in which the problem is enmeshed.

In our own practice, educating from an ecofeminist perspective based in a politicized ethic of care means that we have a dual purpose: helping students identify and participate in issues that are locally important and personally meaningful while

ensuring that they make connections between these issues and the "big picture." We also attempt to provide opportunities for students to develop relationships with, for example, the river that runs through their neighbourhood or the toad that lives in their backyard; we believe that caring for specific subjects often encourages activism aimed at ensuring that these new (or old) friends continue to prosper (Quinn, 1995).

Annette Greenall Gough (1990) makes a similar distinction based on prepositions when discussing approaches to environmental education: One can teach *about* the environment, *in* the environment, *for* the environment, or *with* the environment. Teaching *about* the environment typically takes place in classrooms where interactions with nonhuman nature are mediated through books, theories, and laboratory equipment. Such mainstream methods, we feel, are part of the problem. For example, we both completed a Master in Environmental Studies, where we learned about abstract ecological principles and conservation issues primarily within the confines of the built environment; had we not ourselves emphasized field work in independent studies and extracurricular activities, we could easily have graduated with minimal experience with the very creatures and communities we were being taught how to protect.

In contrast, teaching *in* the environment represents an implicit challenge to the widespread belief that "education is solely an indoor activity" (Orr, 1992, p. 87). Many of the traditional disciplines can be enriched by going outside. Possibilities include pond and snow studies in biology; field trips to local eskers and moraines in geography; walks through the community to determine the influence of natural areas in human settlement patterns for history class; and poetry readings while enjoying direct sensory access to the skies, trees, rivers, and wildlife that have inspired so many writers. While mere change of locale could constitute teaching *in* the environment, ideally the point is to create a learning experience where the subject matter is tangible and situated in time and place.

Greenall Gough suggests, however, that the concept can be pushed further to include teaching *in* the environment while actually teaching *about* environmental issues. The difference, essentially, lies in the attention brought to problems as opposed to mere facts; implicitly, when teaching *about* the environment, knowledge is understood to be for something other than its own sake. Learning *about* the environment *in* the environment can be a powerful experience indeed. It is one thing, for example, to read books and attend lectures about deforestation in the tropics. It is quite another to visit, as we both did during a field course, the Tabasco region in Mexico where the last few acres of uncut forest are cordoned off for protection, and where the rest of the landscape looks just like home—fields and pastures, dotted with the same cattle and the same tractors, with tiny woodlots at the sides or back of the farms. Indeed, what struck us most about that experience was the realization that the razing of forests we so feared and condemned in the tropics had already taken place in southern Ontario. It was an unforgettable lesson—one which has

forever coloured our understanding not only of deforestation but also of who we are and where we live.

Teaching *for* the environment, as the preposition suggests, is more explicitly political and perhaps for this reason, relatively rare. Of course, what is often overlooked is that *all* education is political. For us, then, one of the greatest benefits of teaching *for* the environment is that it creates a space within which to draw attention to the politics implicit in all curriculum. If we choose, for example, to stress the "man versus nature" theme in Canadian literature, that choice is political. If we teach the principles of resource management without questioning the human/nature relationships implied by those very words, that choice is political, too. Teaching *for* the environment is deemed to be more political only because it openly challenges the biases of mainstream industrial society which normally pass unnoticed.

In teaching *for* the environment, we aim to help students understand the cultural and historical specificity of various attitudes and behaviours toward the nonhuman. It is not a case of indoctrinating students; quite the contrary, it requires bringing to their attention choices and possibilities which are otherwise hidden. At a recent workshop, for instance, where we introduced environmental activism as a topic for discussion, our goal was to help students identify the types of actions that they considered effective and with which they personally felt comfortable. Taking inspiration from an activity suggested to us by David Selby (1994), called, "Where do you draw the line?" (p. 16), we presented students with a variety of statements which they were to arrange and rank as "acceptable" or "unacceptable" (terms which the students themselves were left to define). The statements given out ranged from signing a petition, to writing letters of protest, to participating in a restoration project, to breaking into a laboratory to steal files. Students deliberated on their own for a few minutes, then shared their thoughts with a partner and, finally, with the entire class. In this way, they were able to reflect on the forms of activism most suited to their interests, personality, and code of ethics, and, at the same time, to understand that others might choose differently, and why.[2]

The last category, teaching *with* the environment, is also rare. According to Greenall Gough, teaching *with* implies fostering deep personal connections between the students and their particular life contexts. A good place to start is with the students themselves—with the ways in which they, as natural entities, respond, for instance, to light, heat, smells, sounds, and so on. Too seldom are we invited to pay attention in this way to our embodied connections with the rest of nature and, consequently, as Susan Griffin (1989) maintains, we tend to ignore "the evidence of our own experience" (p. 7). One of our goals as environmental educators is to challenge such devaluation of embodied knowledge and to celebrate with students the fact that we are living, breathing creatures with profound ties to the natural world.

To do so often means simply getting outside where opportunities arise or are created to engage with and wonder at the miraculous workings of life. For example, there is nothing quite like accompanying a bunch of rowdy teenagers on an "owl

prowl." En route along a dark path in the woods, much giggling, guffawing, and general silliness occur until that first owl is enticed in by the imitations of its call; the ensuing silence is magical as each student strains to hear the hoots and squints in the darkness for a fleeting glimpse. Time stands still.

By fostering this sense of wonder, we can begin to develop an understanding for and appreciation of our connectedness to our home place. Thus, even when dealing with abstract concepts like extinction and extirpation, students are more likely to situate their knowledge in the experiences of their own lives. For example, we recently accompanied students from London, Ontario, on a hike to the Thames River which flows through their city. London is located at the northernmost limit of the eastern deciduous forest which in Ontario is known as "Carolinian Canada." Many nonhuman residents are unique to this part of the country, one being the hackberry tree whose bark is distinguished by thick, wavy, protruding ridges. Having students touch the bark, take notice of it, and then reflect on the challenges facing species trying to survive in this heavily developed part of Canada made the ensuing discussion on conservation and ecological restoration that much more compelling. We concur with Plumwood (1991) when she writes:

> Special relationship with, care for, or empathy with particular aspects of nature as experiences rather than with nature as abstraction are essential to provide a depth and type of concern that is not otherwise possible. Care and responsibility for particular animals, trees, and rivers that are known well, loved, and appropriately connected to the self are an important basis for acquiring a wider, more generalized concern. (p. 7)

Donna Haraway (1988) maintains that "situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals" (p. 590). And it is communities which are the basis of much ecofeminist activism (Salleh, 1993). Indeed, Vandana Shiva (1993b) asserts that much of what has been labelled environmentalism could just as easily be called activism for community (p. 99).

Working from the standpoint of a politicized ethic of care which includes both the human and nonhuman is a good place from which to start acknowledging and nurturing connections to community. Since encouraging relationships with life other than human is much neglected in mainstream education, it is here that we have chosen to turn much of our attention. Nature experience and natural history are essential in that regard. Unfortunately, natural history has fallen somewhat out of favour in environmental education circles, probably, as Mike Weilbacher (1993) has suggested, as a result of it having the lifeblood drained from it by practitioners who equated it with the memorization of the "encyclopedia of ecological esoterica" (pp. 5-6).

Nevertheless, natural history has an important role to play in learning with and teaching with nature and understanding what is happening in our own neighbourhoods. The "environment" is not somewhere out there, far away; it is part of our

lives in an immediate and tangible way. Natural history, from this perspective, involves learning about the needs, quirks, and life histories of nonhuman members of the natural communities of which we are a part. It is about understanding the intimate relationship, for example, between monarch butterflies and milkweed and marvelling at the monarch's astonishing migratory feats. And it is the surprise of an explosive shower of seeds upon handling the ripe pods of a touch-me-not. Natural history is about the delight and satisfaction which come from close observation of and acquaintance with our many nonhuman neighbours throughout the seasons. It works against the sheer and willful inattention to the world around us which, as Mary Midgley (1989) points out, underlies many of the environmental problems we now face.

This customary inattention, alas, detracts from even the best-intentioned undertakings of environmental educators. For example, two different school boards with whom we have worked have actively promoted tree planting. Even though the initiative stemmed from an admirable idea, they were botched, in our opinion, by the fact that the saplings distributed and planted were non-indigenous Norway spruce. The cardinal rule of ecological restoration, which is to plant native species, was ignored. As a result, instead of learning about the importance of species that coevolved within a natural community, students experienced first and foremost an exercise in hard physical labour unrelated to the broader environmental picture.

It is not enough simply to plant trees. It is not enough simply to have experiences, as John Dewey (1938) pointed out long ago. The contexts of our endeavours—not only ecological, but also cultural, political, and, of course, pedagogical—must be taken into account. To do so, we advocate starting where students are and from there, helping them discover and work toward building healthy relationships with their local communities—human and nonhuman. Moving beyond the lived experience of students to bring into consideration larger, even global, issues is the next essential step. The trick becomes entertaining a variety of concerns while avoiding the pitfalls of either reducing environmental education to "personal toilet training" (Gough, 1990, p. 66), or creating "ecologically concerned citizens who, armed with ecological myths, are willing to fight against environmental misdeeds of others but lack the knowledge and conviction of their own role in the environmental problems" (Gigliotti, 1990, p. 9). If environmental education is to be truly transformative, connections must be fostered in such a way that students have both the desire and the ability to become actively involved. Teaching from an ecofeminist perspective with the goal of developing in students a politicized ethic of care is, in our opinion, a sound beginning.

Endnotes

[1] Critical pedagogy is not easily defined since proponents take inspiration from a diverse range of critical theory. Nonetheless, Weiler (1992) has suggested that a common focal point is the critical examination of existing structures which "challenge dominant understandings

about education and schooling" (p. 5). Education which specifically addresses racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism is an example of this type of approach.

[2] We do *not* advocate illegal activities in the classroom, but use examples of such activism to demonstrate what others have done; in our experience, most of the students are well aware of these activities because they are highly publicized and already have strong feelings about their appropriateness.

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